GREATNESS REDEFINED

October 23, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 10:35-45

"...whoever would be great among you must be your servant..."
-Mark 10:43 (RSV)

The topic this morning is success, power, prestige, status. Jesus said:

"Whoever would be great among you must be your servant."

And, as is often the case, what he said stands in the sharpest contrast to the way things are for you and me...

We live in a culture in which the pursuit of position, prestige, status, is a virtual obsession.

Corporately, we cannot conceive of being anything but "number one"... Those who study us conclude that most of us, who are not ever going to be "number one," still are very much motivated by the possibility; however remote... so much so that, subtly, the image of greatness - or status - can become more important than the reality, and certainly a lot more accessible.

That is the premise, stated with directness and unembarrassed candor, of a book, Winning Images, whose subtitle is, "Nothing Succeeds Like the Appearance of Success." The book jacket makes several stunning assertions...

"Every winner has had a winning image. Moses had one. And Jesus. So did Babe Ruth, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rudolph Valentino and John F. Kennedy. So does Coors Beer, IBM and Robert Redford.

"Whatever you call it, it's the way other people perceive you: it's the picture of yourself which you put in their minds that makes them like you, admire you, believe you, want to do what you say."

In order to create the "appearance of success," in case you are not altogether successful, the book makes specific suggestions: "Always go first class, purchase the best quality business card, choose the most reputable interior decorator and make sure that attractive pictures of your family are evident amidst your diplomas and awards on the wall. And - appear to be busy... Never let your clients know how few appointments you have." After all, the author asks, "Would you entrust your face to a plastic surgeon whose appointment book is empty? And raise your fees to the price that makes you look expensive, because it will say that you are also good."

Now if you are skeptical and think my friend's book is a gross overstatement of the way things are; that we are not so gullible as to be taken in by images created out of thin air, rather than reality - ponder for a moment how terribly successful the current negative advertising strategies of the national political campaign have been, and how utterly committed the brains in both parties are to it. It's so important that the image makers are on the cover of TIME instead of the issues and the candidates. I'm distressed and depressed that it works, and that the book, in fact, describes something true about us.

It was in 1959, the era of the gray flannel suit, that Vance Packard wrote a book which made us aware of the symbols of prestige. The Status Seekers pointed out that post-war Americans were "continually striving to surround themselves with the visible evidence of the superior status they are claiming." Packard identified those "status symbols" as: proper address, occupation, the right friends, clubs, religion, clothing, cars and of course, having one's own key to the executive washroom. He quoted a British observer who described the new American as "a person borrowing money he can barely pay back to buy something he doesn't really want, to impress someone he can barely stand."

There are variations of the theme. In high paying occupations, the game may be played with no holds barred. But, more modest professions must devise different symbols if the honorable search for status is to continue. College professors, for example, don't join the jet set. In the academic world status has to do with books written, journal articles published, and consulting jobs. In some professions, such as the ministry, which everyone assumes has something to do with both poverty and humility, the search becomes positively tortuous. Size of membership, budgets are effective, but too blatant to parade. More important are things like school, professors I know, books I have read, and world class theologians who know my name... "The last time I talked to Hans Kung," for instance, is a good one. For Presbyterians, time spent in Scotland, I have discovered, is a very good number.

Studies have shown that the same phenomenon occurs in Communist countries. Marxism, of course, has no provision at all for rank and privilege. The official ideal - the goal - is a classless society. A Harvard project, however, concluded that Marxism has simply stimulated people to be a little more innovative about status seeking: that there are in fact, no fewer than ten identifiable class ranks in Soviet society.

And as if on cue, last Sunday's New York Times Magazine, included an article on "Kids In The Fast Lane." In California, at least, a four-year-old is nowhere without his karate class and kiwi in his lunch box. The author tells how youngsters at lunchtime in pre-school wow one another with spaghetti with pesto, champagne grapes, Chinese chicken salad - only a few eat peanut butter and jelly.

Now, we can have some fun with this - but - the dynamic is not superficial. In a serious study, In Search of Excellence, Thomas Peters and Robert Watterman suggest that corporate success is often an expression of a deep human longing. The authors quote a psychologist to make their point:

> "Man transcends death by finding meaning
> for his life. It is the burning desire of
> the creature to count. What man really fears
> is not so much extinction but extinction
> without significance."
> [Ernest Becker, In Search For Excellence, p. xxiii]

It would appear that we are here talking about something very close to the essence of our humanity, which leads back to the starting point for this exercise - which is the 10th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark. What a wonderfully human incident! Jesus and his disciples are on the road to Jerusalem. The decision to go is a major turning point in the story. The pace quickens. The things he says on the road are hard, uncompromising, almost harsh. Tension is mounting. The disciples, who have never fully understood who he was or what he was about, sense that something very important is happening. Some of them are afraid. He seems, after all, to be intentionally precipitating a crisis.

And it is at this moment, with exquisitely bad timing, that James and John say to him, "Grant us to sit at your right hand and your left hand when you come into your glory." They don't mean "heavenly glory." They still think they're on their way to a revolution, a political coup d'etat. They still think the end of this journey will be Jesus of Nazareth sitting on the throne of David... And when that happens they'd very much like to share the spoils of victory. They want the status of their new position. The other ten disciples, when they hear this untimely and inappropriate request are "indignant." The reason is simply that James and John got there first and asked for what they all wanted.

Jesus' response to them is intriguing. You'd think Jesus would tire of their posturing, their dullness, or be offended by their callousness. He's on his way to his death and they're talking about status. But he doesn't criticize. What he does is gather them all and use their request to teach a new truth... "those who rule the gentiles, Lord it over them... but not with you... whoever would be great among you must be your servant."

I am intrigued by that. He did not teach that it was wrong to want to be great. If he wanted to teach that being a Christian means leaving behind all ambition, all striving for excellence, he missed a great opportunity. In fact, he does not suggest that his followers are immune to ambition. What he seems to be doing is redefining. As he did so often, he

is here taking a component part of our humanness and giving it a new shape, a new being - converting it. It's all right to want to be great, he was saying. It's just that you've got the wrong definition of greatness. It's not what you think it is. It's not power and authority and prestige, even though the whole world operates on that premise. True greatness is a product of service.

Think how often Jesus did that - turned upside down some venerable human tradition.

"In order to enjoy life you have to learn to give it away."

"In order to experience love, you have to risk your own."

"In order to live, you have to die."

"In order to receive, you must give."

"In order to be yourself, you must be for others."

"In order to be great, you must be a servant."

In three short years, Jesus overturned the accumulated tradition of religion and morality in a way we still struggle to comprehend.

Righteousness is not a matter of legalism, he taught. Goodness is not simply a matter of avoiding evil. It is the active pursuit of good.

Morality is not abstention from evil so much as it is being helpful, doing kind things, feeding people, sharing what you have. It is as new and startling today as it once was. We need this reminder. The church needs this reminder that Jesus defines "greatness," not the world. Gibson Winter once wrote about the "cultural captivity of the Christian church," and by that he meant that the church is always tempted to let the culture define success. A great church, when the culture does the defining, looks like an ecclesiastical Bloomingdales or AMOCO - big, strong, powerful, wealthy. But when Jesus does the defining, a great church, regardless of its size, is a church which serves.

We need a personal reminder that one of the things being a Christian means is that we operate with a radically different definition of success and greatness. It is an unfortunate misunderstanding to conclude that Christian faith and success in the world are incompatible; that only people of ordinary or modest accomplishment can be faithful disciples. I'm not sure we have thought about this one nearly creatively enough. I'm grateful that Dave Brubeck has been striving for greatness all his life. I'm grateful for surgeons who are driven to be the best. Christian faith should applaud and support the effort to become all that we can be, to use to the fullest God given skills, intelligence. And it seems to me that we need to be grateful for corporate excellence, for executive greatness which enables the complex and magnificent culture of ours to function. I don't think there has to be a contradiction between the striving for excellence and our faith.

I do think we who espouse Christian faith have a responsibility, however, to be a counter culture - particularly those of us who practice and celebrate our faith on North Michigan Avenue. I think we who are successful very much need to remember the greatness of service - not only by serving - but also by celebrating those who choose service vocations as an expression of faith.

I want to celebrate excellence in the brokerage but also the public schools where the symbols of success are very modest. My heroes and heroines: my "great people" are dedicated teachers and police and social workers who decide that at the end of the day the rewards that matter have to do with people helped and healed and fed and housed. And in my own profession, they are the faithful men and women who work in and lead the hundreds and hundreds of small congregations which faithfully serve their communities. If you want to be great, you must be a servant.

Now there is an internal dynamic here which has the power to transform this entire topic. I'm not sure we understand it thoroughly. But I know that when the Gospel sounds like a prescription for colorless, lifeless, obligatory service to the human race, most people tune out. Jesus didn't put it that way. He didn't say that it is wrong for you to want to be great. He didn't say that it's wrong to want to live a full and happy life. It's just that we're inclined to let the world define greatness and fullness and happiness instead of him.

In his wonderful spiritual autobiography, to which I have referred before, Dan Wakefield tells about his pilgrimage from a fast-laned Hollywood life filled with the symbols of success and also the consequent tragedies - to a fuller, much healthier life centered around his relationship with God and the church which he had rejected years ago. The church to which he found himself drawn, began not only to minister to him, but to ask him to do things. You know how that goes. You walk in one day, show a little interest and the next thing you know you're on a committee. We're expert at that. And there is an internal logic and wisdom beneath it.

In Wakefield's case he was asked first, very tentatively, if he would help make chili for a group that was meeting in the church. He writes - "The most filling part for me wasn't the meal but cooking... I was given the most important gift of all, the chance to serve." And then Wakefield, with his journalist's integrity, says what intrigues me about this topic. "I responded not from 'selflessness' but a sort of 'enlightened selfishness,' not because it made me holy but it made me happy." [Returning, p. 226, 227]

He had kept, for years, for some reason, a poster with an Albert Schweitzer quote on it. Suddenly it made sense. Schweitzer had said -

> "I don't know what your destiny will be
> but one thing I know, the only ones among
> you who will be really happy are those
> who have sought and found a way to serve."

We deprive the Gospel of its power if we understate that. We miss the power of the Gospel to change our lives - to recreate us - if we understate the radical demands of Jesus. To follow Jesus is to be converted. To believe in him is to change the way you live. It is to march to a different drummer. It is to pick up burdens you don't have to pick up. To believe in him is to volunteer for discomfort. It is to be emotionally vulnerable - to feel the pain of others.

To follow him is to live - not for self but for others. It is to pour out your life for something other than your own amusement or advancement. You know this greatness when you witness it - when you see someone living for and serving an aging parent, a difficult spouse, a special child, a needy friend.

Over the years I have had the privilege of knowing many "great people." Let me tell you about one of them. Horace "Holly" Mitchell was a successful business man and faithful Christian. In his eighties, he had stood by his wife as she descended slowly but surely into Alzheimier's Disease. When she finally was placed in a nursing home Holly visited her every day. Long after she stopped recognizing him, long after the visits had become very unpleasant, he continued to visit her, every day. I asked once, why he did it. "After all, Holly, she doesn't recognize you. Why not spare yourself this pain?" "I go," he said, "because I promised to stay with her a long time ago. Besides, I'm not alone. When I go to visit her, someone is with me."

It is to give time away - to invest precious hours doing something useful for another human being. Regardless of who we are - we are called to serve. It is tutoring, or cooking, or visiting, or building, or meeting on an evening when the couch and a book beckons. It is gradually to turn your life around. And the promise is that you will make the amazing discovery that he knew what he was talking about when he said there is greatness in service, and there is an abundance of life in giving life away. The last thing he said to them was: "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve..."

At the center of it all is the indescribable mystery of his life and death. The compelling thing about Jesus is that he lived it. Jesus lived for others. He was the Man for others... Jesus demonstrated what it means to live life by giving life away.

The compelling thing about Jesus is that he died to show them, and you and me I believe, that there is nothing greater that any of us can be than a servant of all. It is the central mystery of our faith - that his life was poured out, that his servanthood was expressed finally and terribly and beautifully by his dying for us and that in that dying we have been given new life... It is the central mystery of this Christ-life to which we aspire - that if we want to be great, we must somehow be servants of one another, and together, servants of the world he loved. That is the challenge - the imperative - and the promise. "Whoever would be great among you, must be your servant."

Amen.